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## The Mute “E” of a Listening Presence:

### An Interview with Corine Shawi

Formally intricate and politically subversive, the films of Lebanese director Corine Shawi are composed of elliptically edited sequences, impassioned musical interludes, and sensual depictions of the female body. Her exploration of identity and female desire is interwoven with sights, sounds, and evocations of Lebanon’s present and its past. Our exchange took place in the spring of 2019 and it focused primarily on Shawi’s documentary *e muet* (2013). Prior to *e muet*, Shawi made five short documentaries: *Daniela* (2006), *Oxygène* (2007), *Affinity* (2007), *Film of Welcome and Farewells* (2007), and *Je t’aime infiniment* (co-directed with Nikolaj B.S. Larsen, 2010).<sup>1</sup> In *Affinity*, she explores works by the Polish Art Deco artist Tamara de Lempicka, evoking the sensual energy of her paintings of women. *Oxygène* features Shawi’s family members as they express their anxiety about her brother’s unexplained health condition. Her latest film, *La passion selon André* (forthcoming 2020), considers the power of faith and offers a reflection on suffering and the human condition. *E muet* was selected for the International Competition of the Marseille International Film Festival in 2013.

*E muet* features three women, Nanou Ghanem, Johanne Issa, and Rajwa Tohmé. As personal friends of the director, the women come from a similar social background. Born during the Civil War (1975–1990), at the time of filming they were all living in Beirut, the city where most of the film takes place.<sup>2</sup> Whilst music and song constitute a point of commonality between the women, the film reveals little about their lives aside from their personal

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<sup>1</sup> Trailers and summaries of Shawi’s films can be found on her website at <https://www.corineshawi.com/home>.

<sup>2</sup> Several scenes were also shot in Switzerland and Germany.

relationships. Shot mainly in close-ups and extreme close-ups, *e muet* is composed of a series of interviews with these women, who reflect on their sexual encounters and discuss their attitudes towards love and intimacy.

In her first filmed interview with the director, Rajwa explains how she is content being in several relationships at the same time. Later in the film, she revisits her unease about monogamy after revealing that she has been living with someone for almost two years. She confesses that “everything has fallen apart,” but it remains deliberately unclear whether she is referring to the unstable situation in Lebanon or to her relationship. For Rajwa, living as part of a couple is strange and confusing: “I know how to live with seven, I know how to live alone, but I don’t know how to live as two.” The conversations with Nanou focus on the ephemerality of feelings and the reasons why her recent relationship ended. In one scene, she ponders the inexplicable nature of her depressive mood, while singing along to Cyndi Lauper’s “Time After Time.” Nanou speaks openly about her sexual desires and confesses that she is not at peace with herself and misses having her family close by. By contrast, Johanne remains silent throughout the film, expressing herself indirectly and non-verbally. When Shawi asks her about her views on “life as a couple,” she simply smiles shyly.

Interview scenes are interspersed with shots of the Beirut River, a night-time carnival, the coastline, objects marked by bullet holes, and other distinctive landscape shots. Verbalized in a mixture of Arabic and French, the women’s feelings and longings saturate the wider landscape, where traces of war linger.<sup>3</sup> Through experimental techniques of fragmentation, ellipsis, and abstract images left unexplained, Shawi fashions a female-only site for the

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<sup>3</sup> Discussing Lebanese film productions, Lina Khatib highlights that “French funding often comes with restrictions on the use of language”, quoting Lebanese film director Randa Chahal who claims that certain French funding sources often demand that 70% of the dialogue is in French (2008: 40). Shawi confirmed to me that she was not obliged to include a percentage of the dialogue in French to obtain funding for *e muet*.

expression of friendship, sexuality, and queer desire, allowing open conversations to take place on taboo topics, including sex, depression, and nonmonogamy.

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AF: In *e muet*, I love the ambiguous moments between yourself as a filmmaker and the women you film. I'm thinking of your interactions with Rajwa. These exchanges are suggestive and seductive. In one instance, we have the feeling that an impromptu erotic encounter is going to take place between you both, which Rajwa will have to later explain to her partner. The possibility of transgressing the frame in this way is striking. Did you intend to exploit these ambiguous moments in order to make the audience question gender stereotypes, for example, of women as passive and faithful partners?

CS: The scene with Rajwa generates ambiguity because the game of seduction doesn't reach a conclusion and the spectator is left to imagine, as you point out, what might unfold. I had filmed other more explicit moments, but I definitely didn't want to include them. This was the most difficult scene in the film to edit. Rajwa's story changed dramatically and I was part of her story.<sup>4</sup> I wanted to experience these moments without filming them, and then a complex question arose: Am I living or filming? As you saw in the film, I decided to do both at the same time. The game of seduction is there, the tension is there, my hand that appears in the frame and touches her is there. I was asking myself questions about my own sexuality and my relationship with my friends in their search for love. Rajwa's freedom fascinated me. The more I got close to her, the more her behaviour became interesting because it directly affected me. I wanted to learn from the experiences of these women in order to question myself about what I was experiencing and thinking. I was interested in them specifically because their lifestyles were out of sync with what can be classed as a stereotypical model of femininity.

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<sup>4</sup> Shawi is referring to Rajwa's changing personal circumstances as described in the introduction.

Figure 1. Rajwa in *e muet* (2013) © Corine Shawi

AF: When we hear Barbara's "Dis, quand reviendras-tu," we observe Johanne's facial expressions in detail. The music and lyrics express the unspoken emotions of her interior world. Her non-verbal, musicalized presence and the melancholic mood conveyed resonates with the parallel world of Nanou. When you were editing the sounds and images, did you privilege the fluidity of feeling between these women?

CS: The montage was done gradually. I started filming in 2008 and finished in 2011. During the editing, it was important to preserve the chronology, in order to follow the development of these women on their journeys of self-discovery. The women echo each other. They speak to each other without meeting physically.<sup>5</sup> They seem very different but the common ground they share links them together intensely. They are from roughly the same social background, they have similar artistic tastes, and they each examine love. When things aren't going well for Nanou, Rajwa is experimenting and coming out of her shell, and vice versa. This was orchestrated intentionally during the editing process. When Johanne listens to the song by Barbara, this sequence creates a connection between two phases, two states, and two periods of time.

Figure 2. Johanne in *e muet* (2013) © Corine Shawi

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<sup>5</sup> Here Shawi is describing the way in which the women's stories resonate with each other. While each interview constitutes a face-to-face encounter between the director, who remains mostly off-camera, and each of the women, the montage enables the topics of conversation and the feelings evoked to overlap, forming implicit bonds between them and their individual experiences, even though they are never filmed in conversation together in the same physical space.

AF: Certain shots in *e muet* remind me of your short film *Daniela*, which also explores questions of gender and sexuality. Especially the way you film Daniela's body, via close-ups of her neck, fingers, eyes, and mouth. Your camera becomes distracted by her body, and entranced when we see her athletic body in motion. These slow-motion images are intoxicating. They push us to listen to the non-verbal details of the mise-en-scène (the smoke from Daniela's cigarette, the light from the window, the empty Corona bottle). Accumulatively, these details begin to overwhelm her words. Do you think the slow-motion shots of Daniela are more expressive than the moments when she addresses you directly?

CS: I'm also thinking of *Affinity*, in which I analyze paintings by Tamara de Lempicka using close-up shots of the mouths, necks, and hands of women. I think it's a very instinctive visual language, stemming from a deep fascination with beauty and feminine sensuality.

Figure 3. *Affinity* (2007) © Corine Shawi

*Daniela* was the first film in which I questioned sexual identity, the body and the emotions I was feeling but hadn't yet accepted or assimilated. I didn't know Daniela well, but I wanted to meet her, attracted by her androgynous physique. This moment you're referring to in the kitchen was very intimate. She revealed things about her life and childhood to me, and I discovered that she was just as fragile as me, which I found deeply moving. We chose the corner where she usually smokes and there was a bit of magic. Everything seemed to fit together, the light, the smoke, the empty bottle, and most of all her silhouette that contrasts with the rest of the room. I didn't want to reveal from the start that it was a woman and so I lingered on the close-ups of her body before showing her in full. Her words and thoughts are

important, but the image avoids *illustrating* her words. Images have this wonderful and magical power to transcend meaning. The poetry is felt but can't be explained. Even though I'm choosing a specific visual language, the established rules and conventions spontaneously shatter, which I love. Then, afterwards, I discovered that these 'errors' are very organic.

Figure 4. A blurry shot of Daniela in *Daniela* (2006) © Corine Shawi

AF: In *e muet*, we feel your presence as a listener, especially during the silences that arise when the filmed subject pauses to reflect or doesn't say anything at all. You listen to these women with your camera in a non-voyeuristic way. Is there a link between the silent "e" in the film's title and the activity of listening?

CS: Nanou is a close friend. When I decided to film her, I didn't want her to talk to me on the phone anymore but, rather, in front of the camera. I tried to look directly at her while filming her speaking, because she was addressing herself to me, and I wanted to listen to her. I think it's vital to sustain this kind of physical contact because I'm committed to listening to the interviewee. It's essential to look at her when she speaks, just as it is to keep quiet sometimes, or to restart the conversation.

I had made a sort of fictional pact with the women in *e muet*. I wanted to film them when they had something to say, and I had even asked them to do it without me, when I was away travelling. A friend of mine looked after my equipment and I had given him instructions for framing the shots. Rajwa finds herself alone in this way, in front of my camera, talking to me during my absence. When I'm engaged in a film with other characters, I'm responsible for this engagement, particularly since I'm expecting them to open up to me completely. I'm infinitely

grateful for their trust and I can only give back by listening to them. They teach me about life, sharing their experiences, and that's amazing.

The mute "e" ["e" muet] is not usually pronounced in spoken French but it is present. This is my approach in the film. I'm part of it, I reveal myself without appearing in front of the camera. The mute "e" at the end of a word can indicate the feminine gender, and the film's three main characters are all women because, as I mentioned earlier, it's also their femininity that inspires me.

AF: I experienced the still shots of the Lebanese landscape and the Beirut River like fragments of an unfinished sentence. There is an image of some rocks next to the sea, and on the concrete next to them there is a small drain and a rust-colored stain that resembles blood. Yet the jazz music accompanying this image, and the movement and sound of the sea distract us. You mix close-ups of the women's faces with the materiality of urban space and we are made to think of the past and the socio-political context of the region. Can you say more about the idea of incorporating the past into the film's present?

CS: The past is present in the life stories of these women. The war has shaped them. Rajwa, in one sequence, relates the fact that she keeps her clothes in a suitcase because during times of war there is an urgency to leave. When she hears fireworks going off, Nanou, who is driving her car, is frightened. These are little details, but they form part of people's everyday lives in this country. Even though the war officially ended in 1990, the conflict is ongoing. There is a sort of cold war taking place between the different confessional communities (the instigators of the conflict are those who have remained in power). It pervades our lives and affects social and cultural relationships. This exerts a sort of control over our individuality that weighs upon our quest for identity.



You mention the landscape shots, which came about late in the filmmaking process. I chose to use different landscapes to represent my own state of mind. I felt imprisoned in this country, just as I felt imprisoned in my body, and I was looking for some arrow signs to film. The shots of arrows were, for me, a sort of emergency exit from this country, in which I felt trapped. The first arrow is painted on the road surface, pointing towards a heap of stones on which I'm climbing. The second is a metal arrow. It points down towards the ground. I filmed this one in Berlin, where the woman who appears first in the film lives. The third arrow is made of concrete, marked by bullet holes. The fourth arrow is the one you're referring to. It's also made of concrete and points towards a boat on the horizon. And the fifth arrow is painted on the road, and it points towards me as I try to keep my balance while walking along an iron beam. This shot was filmed in Switzerland, at the home of the woman who appears just after this moment, sitting under a tree.

There is indeed the past and the present in this film, but it relates to my own personal relationships. I didn't want to add a section that shows the political history of Lebanon but the landscapes that reflect my feelings concerning what I experience and what the characters experience living in this country.

AF: After the suggestive role-play between you and Rajwa, there is a static shot of a tree that leans to one side, in front of a gap in the barrier on the seafront. This image expresses absence, destruction, and solitude. I sensed in this image a disruptive charge, connected to an expression of female sexuality. When you edited the film, did you have the impression you were creating a sort of "overflow," where the feelings and desires of the women you interview leak into the surrounding landscape?

CS: In effect, yes, and this relates to my prior remark about the shots of arrow-shaped signs. There are two other landscape shots in the film, without arrows: the first features the relics and a metal elephant, a sort of animal cemetery from a former time. This precedes the close-up of Nanou, when she speaks about her fluctuating feelings that she can never make sense of, forever held back by the past. The second landscape shot is the one you're referring to, and it comes after the role-play with Rajwa. Yes, this shot is violent. The tree has bent over in the wind and the broken railing expresses a violent desire to transgress a boundary. This is dramatic because it is difficult to do, as Daniela explains at the end of *Daniela* when she says that once the line is crossed, you can't go back. You must accept what has happened. The landscape shots in *e muet* are a direct extension of my thoughts.

Figure 5. Nanou in *e muet* (2013) © Corine Shawi

AF: You merge an awareness of the history of the landscape with the personal situation of these women, situating them in this environment through their intimate lived experiences. Can *e muet* be described as a politically engaged film? Do you think the word “documentary” applies to *e muet*?

CS: I think your words describe the film much better than mine. You analyze, deconstruct, and draw parallels that echo my intentions and my work on the film. I'm not looking to make politically engaged films. But, yes, I confront taboos, I confront society without declaring war. I scatter small landmines, which can also hurt me, but I take this risk.

I currently teach documentary filmmaking at the university, and from the beginning of the course I tell my students that a film could be a documentary, a fiction film, or an experimental film, and to make the difference clearer I explain that in a documentary the actors

aren't paid! But it's a very important question. I don't limit my films by categorizing them as documentaries.

AF: Did you find it difficult to obtain funding for *e muet*? And what about your other films? As a female director, have you found it hard to gain support from producers and distributors?

CS: In 2008, I filmed with my Sony PD150 camera, then in 2011 I purchased the Canon 5D with a sound recorder and a good mic. I had invested a lot of time and money when Myriam Sassine of Abbout Productions came on board. In 2013, we met our French co-producer, Olivier Marbœuf, at the Visions du Réel festival. The film was selected for the International Competition of the Marseille International Film Festival. I had already submitted the project to the FIDLab to receive funding to help me finish it! Olivier immediately put money into the project so that we could complete it. This was the first film I made that was co-produced and distributed by way of conventional production processes. All the films I had made before were supported by small amounts of money from film forums and cultural organizations, except for my first film, *Les femmes bonnes* (2006), which was produced with the help of my parents.

I don't consider myself underfunded in comparison to my male counterparts *because* I'm a woman. I didn't receive funding for *e muet* and this was due to the film's subject matter. In a region such as ours, the Middle East, and in a country like ours, Lebanon, producers and international funders, both Arab and European, seek to fund exotic or militant films that focus on social or political subjects. My films aren't as direct as that. Instead, they develop themes with a universal reach. In terms of the distribution, some of my films have been selected for Lebanese and international film festivals. *E muet* is the only film that toured European, North African, and Arab film festivals. None of my films have been distributed commercially.

AF: Was the film shown in Lebanon and was it well-received by audiences there?

CS: When I finished editing the film, before moving to the sound editing and mixing, I showed the film to Nanou, Rajwa, and Johanne separately so that I could discuss it with them, in case they had any comments or feedback. Later on, the film was shown in Europe, first at the FID Marseille, at Middle East Now in Florence, at MK2 Beaubourg in Paris, at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, and it was also shown at the Carthage Film Festival, and in Morocco and Algeria. What mattered most to me was that it was shown in Lebanon. To my great surprise, the film was very well-received, and an interesting discussion took place with the audience.

## Bio

Albertine Fox is Lecturer in French Film at the University of Bristol. She is the author of *Godard and Sound: Acoustic Innovation in the Late Films of Jean-Luc Godard* (I.B.Tauris, 2018). Her recent articles explore the films and installations of Chantal Akerman. Contact: [albertine.fox@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:albertine.fox@bristol.ac.uk).

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